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ABSTRACT

The existence of the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament (NIET) and the National Forensic Association (NFA), two strong and well-established national tournaments with essentially similar events descriptions, has certainly contributed to a very substantial amount of uniformity of events descriptions and conflict patterns in the contemporary intercollegiate forensics world. As a case in point, a comparison of the current events descriptions of the Twin Cities Forensic League with those of the NIET and the NFA tournaments reveals a substantial similarity among the three. Moreover, there is a more widespread understanding of the differences which do exist in events descriptions and, in some cases, the principles which those differences represent. Although non-uniform events descriptions and events continue to exist, for a variety of specific reasons and benefits, the greater uniformity of events benefits students who are preparing for a variety of tournaments. However, no set of rules, no matter how uniform, will ever resolve the really central questions of whether a speech must be problem/solution to be persuasive, or what constitutes a serious point, or what the difference is between acting and interpretation. (KEH)

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The NIET and the NFA: What Is Their Impact On Event Descriptions and Conflict Patterns?

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November 18th, 1989

Twenty-seven years ago, as a freshman at Macalester College, I spent the weekend before Thanksgiving--this weekend--competing in Bradley University's large tournament. While debate was my main interest, I was also entered in several individual events: oratory, of course, plus extemp, and after dinner, and competitive listening. Competitive listening turned out to be nap time, and I didn't do too well in it; but I was encouraged by my success in my other events--and pleased that I had been able to adapt to the tournament-specific events rules that changed from weekend to weekend.

I was used to that. I'd started my forensics career at 14, writing a five-minute oration which was pre-titled "The Voice of Optimism" and which took me from Sioux Falls to Detroit to give my speech in the ballroom of the Sheraton Cadillac for the Optimist Club Oratory Contest. In high school the next year, I discovered that orations were expected to be longer that five minutes and that optimism wasn't required. But I also learned that the American Legion gave scholarships to young patriots who spoke about the Constitution, and I was willing to adapt. And I spent time memorizing texts from old copies of Winning Orations for our high school Declamation event, only to find that college students didn't do that sort of thing.

So in college forensics I wasn't surprised to learn that I was expected to write an eight-minute oration which could be expanded to ten minutes, and that I'd better have a manuscript of it which didn't exceed 1,500 words. -I wrote a fine After Dinner Speeech to meet Bradley University's theme of "Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate" and then managed to modify the same speech to match the

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1971, and the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament didn't start until 1978. Those tournaments, of course, reflected the growth of individual events competition in the United States and the simultaneous decline in widespread debate competition.

Because there's a tendency for all of us to generalize from our personal experience, I regard my forensics background as typical. In at least one respect, it certainly was: individual events competition was characterized by a diversity of events, event names, event descriptions, and event rules. As I competed from California, to Florida, to Massachusetts, as well as extensively within the upper Midwest, during my college years, I was not alone as I encountered significant differences in individual events from tournament to tournament to tournament. That the situation has changed from the "good old days" is obvious; but let me trace a bit of the time line of that historical development.

In doing so, I will continue to base my observations on my own professional experience which has occurred in the upper Midwest (principally, but not exclusively, the area identified by AFA as "District 4" for NDT and NIET purposes). I invite my audience members to judge whether my experiences are consistent with theirs or with their areas of the country. I also wish to exercise care with the causal implications contained in the title of my paper: since I caution my argumentation students to beware of the post hoc fallacy, I will try to do the same by examining parallel developments in individual events without causal preconceptions.

To accomplish that aim, I have examined the records of the Twin Cities Forensic League, an organization with which I have been associated in some capacity since 1962, shortly after its founding, and of which I am currently the executive secretary. Established as the Twin Cities Debate League in 1958

the Committee considered but rejected suggestions that competition be added in discussion, impromptu speaking, salesmanship, persuasive speaking, radio speaking, and television speaking; they recommended adding an event called "Public Address" which the membership accepted but named "Rhetorical Criticism." In that event, the contestant was to analyze a significant speech delivered by a prominent American or British speaker within the past twenty years, combining extemporaneous speaking and manuscript speaking with not more than 50% of the address read from illustrative excerpts of the speech or appropriate critical commentary upon the speech. Contestants were to use some "standard form of speech criticism (Hockmuth, Parrish, Burke, Nilsen)" in this 8- to 10-minute event. The Committee observed that this event should be of "particular value to future speech teachers who need experience in the 'lecture mode'"; and they recognized pioneering efforts at introducing this event by "Wisconsin State at Eau Claire and Mankato State."

Those six events remained the TCFL standard until 1974, when, in a lengthy "working lunch" business meeting, the membership added, as a seventh event, Dramatic Interpretation (which had been originally proposed as Dramatic Duo); they also changed the name of After-Dinner Speaking to Humorous Speaking, changed the name of Oratory to Persuasive Speaking, and revised the Rhetorical Criticism rules (to eliminate the speaker nationality specification, the historical period limitation, and the critical form specification.) Maximum time limits for the events were set at eight minutes for prose, poetry, and dramatic interp; at ten minutes for persuasive speaking and rhetorical criticism; and at six minutes for humorous speaking and extemporaneous speaking (which included an added minute for the judge to question and the speaker to respond). Defeated motions included a proposal to combine prose and poetry as "oral interp" and to eliminate After-Dinner Speaking. At the time of this

motions are routinely introduced, discussed, and passed which reaffirm the educational value and necessity of contestants' serving as positively contributing audience members for their fellow competitors' speeches.

In 1977, in an acknowledgment of the increasing importance of individual events competition and declining participation in policy debate, the Twin Cities Debate League changed its name to the Twin Cities Forensic League. In the following year, Expository Speaking was changed to Informative Speaking, despite the philosophical and theoretical objections of one vocal member. Discussion of adding Impromptu Speaking and of the differences between Rhetorical Criticism and Communication Analysis did not lead to any motions; at the Fall, 1978, business meeting, a motion to broaden the Rhetorical Criticism rules to approximate those of the NIET's Communication Analysis event was defeated. That was, by the way, the first reference in the TCFL minutes to the NIET, a tournament which was first held in April of that year.

In 1979, a Special Committee on Impromptu Speaking recommended to the TCFL membership that Impromptu be added for a one-year trial period, using the NIET rules for that event, but prohibiting a contestant from entering both Extemp and Impromptu; the recommendation was approved, but without the prohibition. 1979, the NIET's second year, was also the first year that Impromptu was an NIET event; it was already an NFA event, although with slightly different rules regarding the nature of the topics and the minimum length of the speech.

In 1980, TCFL members passed a motion adopting NIET time limits (ten minutes for all events except Extemp and Impromptu at seven minutes). At that time, NFA time limits were also seven minutes for Extemp and Impromptu; time limits were nine minutes for Prose and Rhetorical Criticism and eight minutes for Poetry, After Dinner Speaking, Persuasion, and Expository Speaking; the time limit for Dramatic Duo was not stated in the tournament invitation. Also

second "experimental event," Program Oral Interp, was discussed and adopted this year by TCFL, but with the old TCFL rule from Program On A Theme that permitted material of more than two types. A TCFL motion passed in 1988 permits Impromptu speech stimuli of unspecified types but different from the proverb-like statements currently used, provided that someone supply such stimuli to the tournament director; that option has never been exercised. A recent TCFL action eliminated the prohibition on prose/poetry double entries, supported by the rationale that so many other interpretation events have been added in which double entries are permitted that the prohibition is no longer effective in reducing tournament size.

A comparison of the current events descriptions of the Twin Cities Forensic League with those of the AFA's NIET and of the NFA's tournament will reveal a substantial similarity among the three, with these observations:

1. Dramatic Interp is not an NFA event; it was adopted by TCFL in 1974 and has been an NIET event since that tournament's 1978 inception.

2. While the name of the NIET/TCFL event Communication Analysis remains Rhetorical Criticism in the NFA event description, the rules are essentially the same. The NFA rule requires the use of "any legitimate critical methodology" while the NIET/TCFL rule requires the "use of rhetorical principles"; I don't regard that as a difference.

3. The NFA and the TCFL Impromptu descriptions both specify that all speakers in a section will receive the same topic; the NIET rule allows speakers in a section to choose one of the same two topics.

3. The NFA's rule for Dramatic Duo limits the number of characters portrayed to two; the NIET/TCFL rule permits portrayal of more than two characters. All Duo rules include the identical statement "This is not an acting event. Thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc., are to be used." While

tournaments in our area typically conform to those of the NIET, although modifications based on classroom limitations are not uncommon.

To return to my topic question, what is the impact of the NIET and the NFA on event descriptions and conflict patterns? It is obvious to any observer that there is a very substantial amount of uniformity of events descriptions and conflict patterns in the contemporary intercollegiate forensics world; the existence of two strong and well-established national tournaments with essentially similar events descriptions has certainly contributed to that uniformity. Non-uniform events descriptions and events continue to exist, for a variety of specific reasons and benefits, and they are likely to continue to do so. Greater uniformity of events descriptions makes my life as a coach easier, and I believe it benefits my students who are aided in preparing for a variety of tournaments. Even further, though, I believe that there is a more widespread understanding of the differences which do exist in events descriptions, and in some cases the principles which those differences represent; that increased understanding is also important. And then there are the really central questions (Must a speech be problem/solution to be persuasive? What is a serious point? What is the difference between acting and interp? Must poetry rhyme?) which will be with us forever and which no set of rules, however uniform, will ever resolve.